

Academic Book Reviews Explained

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Abstract

Academic book reviews provide a valuable service to the academic community by critically evaluating new works, promoting the development of scholarship, and contributing to the quality of academic publishing. A well-crafted book review offers thought-provoking perspectives and encourages discussion and debate among scholars. The Utah Journal of Communication (UJOC) seeks book reviews for upcoming issues. This paper outlines the rationale and process for writing and submitting book reviews to the UJOC.

Keyword: Book reviews, Academic publishing, Academic book reviews

The Utah Journal of Communication seeks book reviews that further its mission to publish informative, academically rigorous scholarship benefiting communication scholars and professionals in intellectual pursuits and career development. This paper provides a succinct rationale that explores the purpose and potential benefits of book reviews. It also proposes guidelines and strategies for writing effective book reviews.

Rationale

When they are approached with the same intellectual rigor that characterizes effective research, academic book reviews provide a valuable service and play a significant role in the scholarly community. They are compelling, authoritative, and useful. They serve an important role in the process of peer review, identified by Biagioli (2002) as “one of the fundamental conditions of possibility of academic knowledge and the construction of its

value” (p. 11).

Overall, effective book reviews contribute most, if not all, of the following benefits:

- A summary and synthesis that distills the author's primary points or arguments while highlighting key insights and contributions to the greater body of knowledge (Wessely, 2000).
- Critical evaluation of the book's content, research method, and/or arguments, providing benchmarks for measuring its quality and reliability (Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998).
- A suggested context for viewing the book's place in related scholarship with an emphasis on its relevance and role in broader academic conversations (Felber, 2002; Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998).
- A basis for scholarly exchange that leads to productive debate and discussion; greater understanding of contemporary issues in

- the field; ideas and strategies for effective teaching; and/or development of new research directions or questions (Hartley, 2006).
- Exposure to new ideas and emerging scholars in both familiar and allied disciplines, suggesting fresh perspectives on existing ideas or theories while encouraging interdisciplinary research and cooperation (Lee et al, 2010; Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998).
- Recommendations that identify specific target audiences while providing a frank assessment of whether the book merits the time and expense of purchase and reading (Stahl, 2018).

Likewise, reviewers themselves play an important part in the academic process. Citing Toner (1997) and Miranda (1996), Lee et al. (2010) identified this role as contributing to scholarly literature “by acting as entrusted critic(s), with the responsibility of informing the readership of seminal works and warning it of inaccurate scholarship” (p. 60). Despite the reality that “academic administrators do not view book reviews very favorably” (East, 2011), one scholar has argued that effective reviews are “rhetorically and interactionally complex and represent a carefully crafted social accomplishment” (Hyland, 2004, pp. 43-44).

Some 25 years earlier, in the first edition of their annual review of literary scholarship and subsequently in a journal article on academic publishing, Hoge and West (1979) called on universities to reward worthwhile book-reviewing on the same plane as peer-reviewed scholarship. They defined “worthwhile” by advocating stringent standards for reviews and criticized reviews that were “brief, impressionistic, formulaic, bland, badly written, or, most distressing of all, nothing more than sales pitches or gratuitous hatchet jobs, ever so thinly disguised” (p. 35).

In short, effective book reviews benefit peers and students by saving them time, stimulating critical thought and scholarly debate, and providing useful directions for future teaching and research (Lee et al., 2010; Brown, 2018). Reviewers play an important role in the scholarly process when their reviews are accurate, conscientious, balanced, and free of bias, and they should be rewarded commensurately (Hoge & West, 1979; Hyland, 2004).

Reviewing for UJOC

At times, the UJOC Book Review Editor will invite reviews of specific books. However, in most cases, reviewers will choose their own books. An appropriate book for review will have been

published no more than three years earlier than a particular UJOC issue’s publication date. The book must be relevant, both to communication and to the reviewer’s own expertise. Reviewers are expected to possess knowledge or background in the book topic. They should avoid reviewing books by authors they know personally or with whom they have a conflict of interest, whether real or perceived. Finally, reviewers should avoid books on subjects about which they harbor strong emotions, especially if they believe they could not review the book fairly and professionally.

After choosing a book to review, the reviewer should read the book — the entire book, including foreword, preface, acknowledgements, references, index, and appendices — at least once, and preferably twice. During the process, it is advisable to take notes on significant points and annotate specific passages. Most reviewers also make notes in the book’s margins as they read. Observations are more likely to be effective if they focus on the following:

- The central question or issue the book addresses.
- The book’s premises and argument or thesis.
- How the book is organized to support the argument or thesis.
- Whether the author(s) provides sufficient evidence to support his/her/their claim(s).
- Whether the evidence is based on credible, relevant sources.
- Whether the author(s) fails to recognize or cite relevant research or evidence.
- The extent to which the author or authors achieve his/her/their purpose.

Preliminary evaluation begins as the reviewer reads the book and takes notes. However, honest reviewers avoid making final judgments about the value or contribution of a book until after they have read it and prepared complete, detailed notes. Only at that point should the reviewer engage in critical evaluation that helps him/her/ them reach a fair, balanced conclusion about the book and its value.

Review Content

UJOC reviews should begin with a bold-faced heading that reflects the author or authors’ name(s), the book’s complete title (including edition number, if applicable), the publisher, the year of publication, the number of pages, and the price. On the next double-spaced line, the reviewer should insert his/her/their name and affiliation. A complete example can be seen on the next page:

Olga Baysha, Democracy, Populism, and Neoliberalism in Ukraine: On the Fringes of the Virtual and the Real, Routledge, 2023, 140 pages, \$52 hardcover, \$20 paperback, \$20 digital.

Oxana Shevel, Tufts University

The review should begin with a compelling introduction that focuses on three things: the book's context, its primary argument or thesis, and the reviewer's overall evaluation. The latter may be brief, but it should include an opinion about the book's place in the broader context of academic/scholarly inquiry in the field.

The balance of the review should include the following, as applicable:

- A concise summary of the book's content (primary arguments/thesis, premises, evidence, and conclusions). This summary should be objective and content-neutral; it should allow the reader to each conclusion about the value of the content without the reviewer's input. The summary should not be written as a chapter-by-chapter recap, but as an overall synthesis of the content.
- A critical analysis of the book. Because this analysis constitutes the heart of the review, the reviewer should focus on:
 - » Research method, if applicable. Is it appropriate for the topic? Is it effective?
 - » Argument or thesis. Is it supported by the evidence? Is it coherent? Does it draw unfounded conclusions?
 - » Evidence. Are primary and secondary sources cited and referenced? Are they relevant? Does the book ignore or fail to recognize relevant research in the field?
 - » Organization. Is the book's structure logical? Is it easy to follow?
 - » Writing. Is the prose clear and effective? Does it speak to the target audience on its level?
 - » Contribution. Does the book add to the body of knowledge in the field? Or does it merely parrot extant research? In what ways, if any, does it advance scholarly inquiry in a meaningful way?
- In addition to the critical analysis, reviewers might also:
 - » Offer specific criticisms, as needed. Address significant shortcomings through constructive criticism and offer recommendations for improvement.
 - » Provide a recommendation. Based on its merit, should other scholars buy this book or require students to buy it? Recommendations should be explained.
 - » Conclude on a positive note. To the extent that it is possible, the final paragraph should accentuate the book's upside. (On the other hand, reviewers should not

- feel obligated to embellish or otherwise misrepresent the book's value or its place in the scholarly literature of the field.)
- » Cite sources and provide references for evidence or commentary referenced in the critical analysis.

Please avoid vague criticisms based on typographical errors or minor errors of fact, unless these errors are so numerous that they raise questions about the overall quality and reliability of the book. Bear in mind that this is the author's book, not the reviewer's book. Reviewers need not criticize the author for failing to write the book that they think the author should have written.

Rules of the Road

UJOC book reviews should conform to the following conventions:

- Style. UJOC is an APA-style publication. All citations and references must adhere to the 7th edition of the APA Publication Manual.
- Length. Reviews should be a minimum of 750 words but should not exceed 1,500 words.
- Quotations. Opinions and other references to the book should be accompanied by direct quotations; quotations should include page numbers.
- Writing. Guido H. Stempel III served as editor of Journalism Quarterly from 1972 to 1989. As Distinguished Professor in the E. W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University, he would tell students, "The greatest need in contemporary academic writing is a return to the simple, subject-verb-object sentence" (personal communication, October 17, 1995). That declaration is as true today as it was nearly 28 years ago. The simple declarative sentence is the workhorse of clear, effective scholarly prose. Academic writers would do well to heed Dr. Stempel's advice.

To summarize, academic book reviews provide a valuable service to the scholarly community by critically evaluating new works, promoting the development of scholarship, and contributing to the quality of academic publishing. A reviewer's overall evaluation of a book may be favorable or unfavorable. However, the reviewer's tone should always be courteous. In all instances, a reviewer owes the reader and the author(s) a fair assessment of a book's contents and conclusions.

To submit book reviews to the Utah Journal of Communication, please send them to submissions@ujoc.org and insert the words Attention: Book Review Editor in the subject line.

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